Gulf oil spill bad for industry and environment

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Body

The good news for Albertans is that the words "dirty oil" are starting to acquire more of a Cajun flavour these days. The bad news is that the fossil-fuel energy industry in general -- an industry on which this province and the world depend for their prosperity -- has suffered another dreadful black eye in the Gulf of Mexico, one to rival the notorious Exxon Valdez disaster off the Alaska shore back in 1989.

And sadly, this is one of those times when the bad vastly outweighs the good.

Because we Canadians live so close to the U.S., under constant bombardment by American media, it is easy to be distracted by the way the current Gulf of Mexico catastrophe is being forced to serve our neighbours' current political obsessions.

To a great many Americans in to-day's hyper-partisan, culture-wars era, the big reason the spill is newsworthy is not the environmental damage to precious wetlands and wildlife, or the implicit threat to a key component of continental energy security. Rather, it's the opportunity to bash Republicans or Democrats over the head.

Thanks to the fancy graphics in newspapers and on television screens, it's almost as easy to get caught up in the technical challenges the disaster presents to high-priced engineers. One can't help but be reminded of the drama of the Apollo 13 rescue, and wonder whether Tom Hanks will be available to star as the can-do miracle worker who -- we all hope -- will figure out how to stop or control the flow of oil from the sea bed.

But there are bigger questions that intriguing political and technical storylines don't address, aren't there?

Questions, for example, about how best to balance environmental risks of an accident with the risk of scarce, high-priced energy between now and the time a cleaner, cheaper energy source is discovered that will keep billions of human beings happy with their standard of living.

As horrible and long-term as the impact of this spill may be to the fisheries, marshlands, coastal wildlife and tourist industries of the Gulf, these may ultimately be minor compared to the damage done to the cause of responsible energy exploration.

Potential offshore drilling is the key energy story these days, from Brazil to the Canadian Arctic. Allowing a relaxation of restrictions on offshore exploration is key to U.S. President Barack Obama's new energy policy, a policy crafted in part to win Republican support for climate-change initiatives. Now he risks losing the latter in the inevitable backlash from Democrats.

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Too often, debate over energy seems be framed as a tussle between those who oppose any risk of accident and environmental loss, and those who insist industry will make intelligent, responsible choices -- and thus deliver energy at lowest risk and price -- if not interfered with by government.

The explosion on British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon oil rig two weeks ago is yet another proof that neither of these positions makes a lot of sense in the real world.

For one thing, it proves that however small the risk may be, it is real, and that the higher the potential cost of an accident, the tinier the risk must be.

Barely a month ago, sounding like an oil executive, Barack Obama defended his offshore drilling policy by saying "oil rigs generally don't cause spills. They are technically very advanced." One imagines he is currently rueing that word "generally," and reminding himself that "very advanced" technology is not a magic wand, as his enemies gleefully refer to the spill as "Obama's hurricane Katrina".

We can only hope that this lesson in the risk of developing energy sources isn't followed up with a lesson for the world about the economic price of not developing new sources of energy fast enough.

Well, a little lesson might be OK, considering Alberta's unique energy position.

After all, the past weeks' developments may mean Albertans will sell our actually-not-so-dirty oil for higher prices and with less criticism in coming months. Now if we can just spend a bit more of the profit avoiding future bad-news stories of our own -- by, say, accelerating tailings-pond cleanup -- we'll get some environmental positives from the Gulf disaster as well.

Graphic

Photo: Reuters, Carlos Barria; A bird flies over oil booms in Breton Island as oil leaking from the Deepwater Horizon wellhead continues to spread in the Gulf of Mexico.

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